

CHAPTER SEVEN

Heraclitus, Language and Religion

Just as occidental historians have chosen to divide the timed existence of the world into B.C.,

Heraclites: "I have searched myself."

Before Christ and A.D., **Anno Domino**, literally, in the year of Our Lord, so occidental scholars have chosen to divide the world of philosophy into Presocratic and Postsocratic. Heraclitus, therefore, yet arbitrarily is a Presocratic.

Heraclitus, born in Ephesus, approximately 544, lived during the latter sixth and early fifth centuries B.C. The only historical facts we know to be certain are that he came from an old aristocratic family and that he was on bad terms with the Ephesians, as *Fragment 95* clearly shows. Heraclitus states the Ephesians should all go out and hang themselves; they exiled Hermadorus merely because he was different. True to this criticism in favor of Hermadorus, Heraclitus, as the first born son rejected his assigned role of privilege and responsibility as custodian of the family wealth and as the religious representative for the family in favor of thinking and writing philosophy. Apollodorus, an early Greek historian, calls Heraclitus a "misanthrope."

Finally, he became a misanthrope, withdrew from the world, and lived in the mountains feeding on grasses and plants. (*The Presocratic Philosophers*, G.S.Kirk & J.E.Raven, fragment 193, p. 182)

Scholars have not considered Heraclites a proper philosopher because he wrote in fragments and, in their judgment, erratically, so his view of God

The Ephesians should go out and hang themselves because they exiled Hermadorus, the finest man among them.

and religion have never been considered significant. However, as a critic of Greek thinking about the Gods, as a thinker about the relation of man's soul to nature and to God and as an interpreter of Greek myths, we find him significant.

Heraclites is similar to Xenophanes in his criticism of a human knowledge and of his description of God(s). His is also similar to Feuerbach's criticism of the relation of religion and denominational religion. Notwithstanding these similarities Heraclites is also very different than both. Both Xenophanes and Heraclites maintained that God existed and both, in this sense, looked upon the various ways human beings portrayed God(s) and practiced religion as denominational.

However, Feuerbach does not recognize that God exists, except as a product and projection of human thought. Yet, Heraclites, in addition, goes farther than Xenophanes and specifies not only how God exists, but also how God acts. Heraclites also begins his analysis where Hegel and Feuerbach later began and ended theirs:

I have searched myself. (*Fragment 8*)

The Greeks generally and Heraclites specifically found the difference between

The Delphic Oracle's speech is symbolic and speaks myths,

other animals within nature and human nature to be *logos*, literally, *speech*, *word*, *reason*, *logic*. Yet, *mythos* also means *speech* and *word* in Greek. Heraclites finds room both for reason and myth, yet, not without criticism of humans who do not use reason and leading Greek poets, such as Hesiod and Homer who misuse myths. To Heraclites, reason explores the limits of reality, whereas reason uses myth to express those things which exceed the grasp of reason.

The lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives signs. (*Frag. 18*)

(When visitors unexpectedly found Heraclites warming himself by the cooking fire:) Here, too, are gods. (*Frag. 74*)

Wisdom is one and unique; it is unwilling and yet willing to be called by the name of Zeus. (*Frag. 119*)

Heraclites states two Greek truths within this fragment, "I have searched myself": first, that this search of himself finds that the distinctive characteristic of human being is *speech*, so the purpose of a human being's existence is to reason; secondly, that the method whereby Heraclites, or any other human being will achieve self-knowledge and knowledge of the world is through speech or reason.

Thinking is common to all. (*Frag. 80*)

Men should speak with rational awareness and thereby hold on strongly to that which is shared in common - as a city holds on to its law, and even more strongly. For all human laws are nourished by the one divine law, which prevails as far as it wishes, suffices for all things and yet, is something more than they. (*Frag. 81*)

The Delphic Oracle also speaks, however, this *speech*, although similar to human *speech*, is also different:

The lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives signs (*semainei*). (*Frag.* 18)]

As we see within Chapter Seven, the Delphic Oracle's *speech* played a

The meaning of reality exceeds reason's ability to express and grasp its meaning.

central role within Plato's dialogue *Apology*, but this was the standard relationship between any Greek city-state and that city-state's Gods or Goddesses. There, as here, the oracle was the god's representative, the priest or priestess of the Greek city-state whose function was parallel to that of *Hermes*, literally, the *messenger* sent by Zeus to human beings; this oracle spoke in a manner such that a meaning other than the literal meaning was possible, a meaning which transcended that of the usual meaning.

Thus, Heraclites emphasizes that the oracle's words are symbolic and the wise man must reflect upon them, be awake to an unexpected meaning, even a sacred, rather than profane meaning. In other words, the Delphic oracle speaks in myths. These myths, however, are as true as the words which human reason produces, but these myths merely express the realities, which exceed the grasp of reason, yet, as signs contain meanings reason can understand.

Unless you expect the unexpected, you will never find truth, for it hard to discover and hard to attain. (*Frag.* 19)

Most people do not take heed of the things they encounter; nor do they grasp them even when they have learned about them, although they think they do. (*Frag.* 57)

Listening not to me but to the *Logos*, it is wise to acknowledge that all things are one. (*Frag.* 118)

Self-reflection realizes Heraclites, finds that the human rational soul is more meaningful than human reason can discover; and, thus, the

rational order which permeates the human being and the world has a deeper meaning than a first self-reflection reveals.

Although this *Logos* is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it -- not only before hearing it, but even after they have heard it for the first time. That is to say, although all things come to pass in accordance with this *Logos*, men seem to be quite without any experience of it -- at least if they are judged in the light of such words and deeds as I am here setting forth. My own method is to distinguish each thing according to its nature, and to specify how it behaves; other men, on the contrary, are as neglectful of what they do when awake as they are when asleep. (*Fragment 1*)

This self-reflective awareness of human being as a speech producer led Heraclites to self-knowledge. But, this self-knowledge projected him into an analogous knowledge about the rational "soul", and the rational source of life within the world. So, Heraclites develops a view of language which recognizes the fact that human understanding exceeds the ability of human words to communicate meaning. He concluded that this self-knowledge will remain limited, because meaning exceeds reason's grasp.

You could not discover the limits of the soul, even if you traveled by every path in order to do so; such is the depth of its meaning. (*Frag. 42*)

Human nature has no real understanding; only the divine nature has it. (*Frag. 61*)

Man is not rational; there is intelligence only in what encompasses him. (*Frag. 62*)

Although intimately connected with the *Logos*, men keep setting themselves against it. (*Frag. 64*)

Notwithstanding Joseph Campbell's excellent work and thought-provoking insights into early and contemporary myths and religion, his sharp distinction between occidental and oriental differences do

not hold up to analysis of texts, in this case that of Heraclites, clearly an occidental pre-Socratic. Both in *Occidental* and *Oriental Mythology: The Masks of God* states that the difference is that oriental religion is "metaphysical" and "psychological" whereas occidental religion is in conflict and "ethical." Campbell refers to the occidental and oriental as opposed:

These are the two discordant great themes of what may be termed the orthodox Occidental mythological structure: the poles of experience of an ego set apart from nature...yet still projecting on the universe a notion of anthropomorphic fatherhood...Whereas in the greater Orient of India and the Far East, such a conflict of man and God, as though the two were separate from each other, would be thought simply absurd. (*Oriental Mythology*, pp. 32-33)

The Greek word, ***Aletheia***, means literally ***a, not, and letheia, to forget, to hide, to bury and to cover up*** so to Heraclitus, ***"truth" is what is uncovered, radically what is.***

Heraclites is clearly metaphysical and

psychological in his analysis of the relation between ***Logos*** and ***logoi***, Divine speech, or reason and other speech expressions, including plant, animal and human expressions of Divine speech, as ***orthos***, or ordered nature -as such, his analysis resembles that of the Memphite God, Ptah, described by Campbell in *Oriental Mythology* (pp. 83-88). Divine reason, therefore, is both immanent and transcendent. Furthermore, human beings, for instance, might have reason, however, only the divine nature has understanding, ***Nous*** - this distinction is one which Aristotle makes great use of in defining ***to theos*** as "thought-thinking-on-thought", or otherwise as "pure act."

Yet, Heraclites also is ethical, indeed, Heraclites notes that being rational is not the human problem whether in relation to knowledge or right action. Reason is not the problem because of which human beings do not achieve knowledge; rather, the problem is one of attitude, a lack of ***pistis***, or belief:

What is divine escapes men's notice because of their incredulity. (*Frag. 64*)

According to Heraclites, "nature loves to hide," (*Frag.* 17), so people who seek wisdom must "expect the unexpected" (*Frag.* 19) and "...acquaint themselves with a great many particulars." (*Frag.* 3)

The hidden harmony is better than the obvious. (*Frag.* 116)

Heraclites, as all the Greeks, had great respect for nature (*phusis*) and that particular manifestation of nature in and through reason (*Logos*).

We should let ourselves be guided by what is common to all. Yet, although the *Logos* is common to all, most men live as if each of them had a private intelligence of its own. (*Frag.* 2)

Just as eyes and ears provided perspective to sense knowledge, so reason provided balance to sense and rational knowledge. The human virtue, therefore, was temperance because through temperance the human potential achieved the stability it required to seek wisdom. Although this is clearly an ethical emphasis, it equally clearly roots in a metaphysical world of reality, or "the nature of things":

It pertains to all men to know themselves and to be temperate. (*Frag.* 9)

To be temperate is the greatest virtue. Wisdom consists in speaking and acting the truth, giving heed to the nature of things. (*Frag.* 10)

The things of which there can be sight, hearing, and learning -- these are what I especially prize. (*Frag.* 11)

Eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears. (*Frag.* 12)

Ultimately, of course, Heraclites sees that human reason is an image of

The wise man knows a great many particulars.
--

Divine Reason, so virtuous actions bring about character, or makes a man ethical, thus, in tune with the divine within nature. Such ethical actions, in turn, bring the human being closer to the Divine; thus, such

an ethical, or temperate human being is wise and such wisdom is divine because he is “half-spiritual”.

A man's character (*ethos*) is his guardian divinity (*daimon*, literally, is half-spirit). (*Frag.* 69)

Heraclites, however, is an astute observer of nature and human beings. As a matter of

Just as the common binds human beings with nature and each other, so the private separates us from nature and each other.

fact, following upon his fellow citizens action against Hermadorus, he levels the harshest of criticisms against them, wishing them the greatest of material wealth, as a punishment for them being “non-spiritual”:

May you have plenty of wealth, you men of Ephesus, in order that you may be punished for your evil ways. (*Frag.* 96)

Yet, not only are his Ephesian neighbors intolerant to outstanding men such as Hermadorus, they are also insensitive to their own speech:

Of those whose discourses I have heard, there is not one who attains to the realization that wisdom stands apart from all else. (*Frag.* 7)

These Ephesians, and other noteworthy Greeks may be learned, however:

Much learning does not teach understanding; otherwise, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, Xenophanes and Hecataeus. (*Frag.* 6)

Although intimately connected with the *Logos*, men keep setting themselves against it. (*Frag.* 64)

Fools, although they hear, are like the deaf, to them the adage applies that when present they are absent. (*Frag.* 55)

Hesiod, whom so many accept as their wise teacher, did not even understand the nature of day and night; for they are one. (*Frag.* 114)

Yet, any Sibyl (of the ten prophetesses who exist) makes more sense, than human beings or these reputed wise men, even when raving:

Human beings are either asleep or awake, depending upon their attitudes.

The Sibyl with raving mouth utters solemn, unadorned, unlovely words, but she reaches out over a thousand years with her voice because of the god within her. (*Frag.* 79)

But, what is wrong with these people? Heraclites divides human beings into two groups: first, the awake, or rationally and sensibly aware, ultimately, the wise man; secondly, the asleep, or the unaware, the foolish man. He uses the child to symbolize the awake and the drunk to symbolize the asleep.

The waking have one world in common, whereas each sleeper turns away to a private world of his own. (*Frag.* 15)

One should not act or speak as if he were asleep. (*Frag.* 14)

A drunken man has to be led by a boy, whom he follows stumbling and not knowing whither he goes, for his soul is moist. (*Frag.* 48)

Heraclites, *Logos*, *Mythos*, Language and God

Whenever we seek to understand the meaning of any word or, especially any reality expressed through words by any author, past or present, we must avoid a common fallacy. The common fallacy is assuming the meaning a person has to be the meaning which the author writes or the speaker speaks. We cannot, therefore, read into Heraclites' words our own meanings. This can happen in two ways: first, between two people speaking with each other; secondly, between

one person living in one era, such as A.D., and the writings of another person living in an other era, such as B.C. For instance, given the fact that Heraclites lived in the sixth century B.C., his word for God, as **Logos**, although in the same Greek language as the **Logos** St. John speaks of within the *New Testament*, cannot and does not mean the same thing. St. John has added the Christian dimension of the "word made flesh".

Divine **Logos** directs the order within the universe and human

Yet, it is clear that the **Logos** of Heraclites is God, distinct from, though present within nature and especially present through the **Logos**, or reason of each human being. It is also clear that Heraclites recognizes that his use of words, when applied to God is an analogous use, namely, applied in a manner somewhat the same and somewhat different. Heraclites, unlike Hume and Feuerbach discusses the existence and operation of God, **Logos** analogically.

The handsomest ape is ugly compared with humankind;
the Wisest man appears as an ape when compared with
god -- in wisdom, in beauty, and in all other ways. (*Frag.*
104.

Wisdom is one and unique; it is unwilling and yet willing
to be called by the name of Zeus. (*Frag.* 119)

Heraclites also
recognizes that human
beings do mis-
represent the God(s) in their thoughts and mis-direct their prayers to
these misrepresentations:

Although the **Logos** is common to
all and present to all, this similarity
and presence excludes identity.

They pray to images, much as if they were to talk to
houses; for they do not know what gods and heroes are.
(*Frag.* 75)

Nightwalkers, magicians, bacchantes, revelers, and
participants in the mysteries! What are regarded as
mysteries among men are unholy rituals. (*Frag.* 76)

The fact that Heraclites recognized that "Wisdom is one and unique...willing and unwilling to be called by the name Zeus", shows

that
Heraclites
differentiated
between

Although **Logos** provides and conserves life with all living beings, yet, the Life of **Logos** is not identical with the shared life.

human beings calling God by the name of the Greek God Zeus and the reality of God; Zeus was merely a human expression of a transcendent God which Heraclites concluded to exist. Furthermore, the fact that Heraclites symbolizes this God as **Logos** and **Logos**, or reason to be fire, nevertheless, Heraclites does not identify **Logos** and fire, but only uses this symbolic example to explain how the change and stability are one and the same within the universe.

Fire lives in the death of earth, air in the death of fire,
water in the death of air, and earth in the death of water.
(*Frag.* 34)

The thunderbolt pilots all things.

The bones connected by joints are at once a unitary whole and not a unitary whole. To be in agreement is to differ; the concordant is the discordant. From out of all the many particulars comes oneness, and out of oneness come all the many particulars. (*Frag.* 112)

As a matter of fact, Heraclites returns to a former analogy. He had compared an asleep person with a drunken man and an awake person with a child. Now, he applies that analogy of the child being an awake person to **Logos**, the royal power as the measure of change, or what the Greeks called time:

Time is a child moving counters in a game; the royal power is a child's. (*Frag.* 24)

Heraclites also clearly sees that both the asleep and the awake, as well as their actions or inactions are subject to and provided for within the fact that **Logos**, God exists and guides the universe.

Even sleepers are workers and collaborators in what goes on in the universe. (*Frag.* 124)

One other observation, a comparative one remains. The analogy of *Logos*, or human reason to *Logos*, Divine Reason and the analysis of thinking-subject to thought-object is as common as it is difficult. We have seen that both Hume and especially Feuerbach took this comparison, yet, did not show the awareness of analogical difference as Heraclites has. However, one text of Heraclites shows the difficulty of this comparison, one which did not escape Hume or Feuerbach and seems to place Heraclites in the same "box" and make him subject to the same criticism to which Hume and Feuerbach subjected Protestant Christians.

This universe, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be - an ever living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures. (*Frag. 29*)

The textual fact, however, is that Heraclites does not identify *Logos*, God with the universe or the wise man. Yet, if *Logos*, God is distinct and transcendent, what can this text mean? Well, we will find a similar difficulty to exist within the Oriental thinking of Lao-tzu (the *Way*) and of the Buddha (the *Upanishads*). Whether or not Christians as yet understand such human expression is questionable. Whether or not such human expression is acceptable by Christians is clear. The recent warning from Catholic Rome about Zen meditation and other so-called oriental meditation indicates that it is not. Nevertheless, the Greek pre-Socratic pagan, Heraclites provides us an early, occidental example, yet, with probable oriental influences of the distinction between *Logos*, as within a spiritual, though Divine dimension and *logoi*, as expressions of that spiritual and Divine dimension.

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